STEWARDSHIP, REFORMATION AND AMAZING GRACE
October 30, 2011

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FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 46
Matthew Hebrews 12:1-2
Romans 5:1-5

"Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."
Romans 5:1 (NRSV)

Gracious creator of the world and everything in it, our Creator, we're not sure we know what to do with a love we did not earn. So startle us again with the truth, the news that in Jesus Christ, you love the world, and all your children, even us. Amen

Money, income, net worth, and the alarming gap between the people at the top of the economic pyramid and the rest of the population are very much in the news.

"Occupy Wall Street" demonstrations in New York, Chicago and other cities are expressing a deep frustration and anger about unprecedented economic disparity in our nation.

One dimension of the issue is religious.

Jesus, after all, had a lot to say on the money. Poor people were around him all the time. He was their friend and advocate.

But, so were people of means – Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea were wealthy men. He dined in homes where the host or hostess could afford a dinner party.

So, not surprisingly Crain's Chicago Business decided to do a feature and interviewed a few clergy last week on the question of how we deal with this potentially sensitive matter. I was one of them. Among other things I said that this is actually an economically diverse church. In spite of its

appearance – this magnificent Gothic structure sitting in the middle of the Magnificent Mile - there is probably more economic diversity in this congregation than most. People have a hard time believing that. But it's true. The very poor regard this place as a refuge and are here all day long. On Sunday morning when we gather to worship there is a wonderful diversity – age, race, and income: young adults just beginning, people who have lost jobs and are struggling, people who are doing very well and everybody in between. Crain's wanted a picture. The photographer hauled a lot of equipment up into the East balcony for a classic view of the expanse and the gorgeous West window. In the pews, in the meantime, were fifteen people, most of them homeless, many of them sleeping, one man stretched out on a pew, snoring. The picture, I predict, will probably not include those persons for whom this is the only place on Michigan Avenue where they are welcome, not harassed, where they can find food, a warm coat, a restroom, and a place to rest and sleep – that is to say, home.

We are on the front line here, in an economy that blesses some of us and leaves others out, between the comfort of economic security and the fear of insecurity; the front line between a market mentality that would define us by why what we wear, the right attire, jewelry, wrist watches, and the scotch we can afford to drink and, above all, the automobile we drive, and an alternate mentality that says we are fully human on the basis of what we give and share; not how much we have, but how much we love – which is the only real "having" there is.

I have been here for twenty six years and the one consistent myth about this place is that we are wealthy. And sometimes I think that the members of this church believe that myth as well. From the first meeting of the Finance Committee I attended twenty six years ago right up to the present I have known the truth and loved the truth that the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago lives out its life for the sake of the world, it's city and neighborhood, that it invests its resources in people, changing lives one life at a time, we like to say. And that while we count, in the wonderful diversity of this place, the economically comfortable and secure, we depend on the support of, not just them, but everyone.

This is Commitment Sunday: when we are asking all our members and friends to stand up and be counted: to make a generous commitment for the witness and program and mission of this church in the year ahead. Not nearly enough of our members and friends do that. If you believe that we

don’t need your gift, please allow me to gently challenge that misconception: we need everyone. It costs $10 million dollars a year to run this place. $4 million of that must come from us – you and me. We have about $1.6 in commitments and we need to double that.

The year ahead will be critical. And my deepest hope is that I will leave a congregation for my successor that is sure of its mission and financially sound. Sue and I have made our pledge (and we won’t even he here – but we will be watching with affection!) – so I invite you to join us in supporting the great work of this great church just as generously as you can.

Bill Coffin said once that if he attended a church on Sunday morning and discovered too late to get up and leave, that the minister was going to preach a stewardship sermon he would immediately bow his head and pray for brevity. So that’s it. My last and very brief stewardship sermon.

And yet, that’s not altogether honest. The truth is that every sermon is something of a stewardship sermon, if by that we mean the responsible and faithful management of everything we have and are: our money, our time, our deepest values and commitments, our very lives.

Every sermon is a stewardship sermon if by that we mean counting our blessings, the gift of our lives, the gift of people to love and above all else the grace and love of God beneath and above it all. Every sermon is a stewardship sermon if by stewardship we mean our joyful response to the good news of God’s Amazing Grace.

The last Sunday in October is not only Commitment Sunday but it is also Reformation Sunday, a time to reflect on who we are and where we came from and who we aspire to be and what we most deeply believe. Peter Gomes said Reformation Sunday used to be the day when the preacher bashed the Pope and Protestants gave thanks that they were not Catholics. In the family of my youth when someone married a Catholic – which two of my cousins did – it was regarded as a great tragedy. Both sides of my family, Buchanans and McCormicks, were pretty sure that Catholics were not Christians – and we knew they felt the same about us. When I went to Confession with my friend, John Shaugnessy, my Dad thought all was lost. Catholics thought our churches were not really churches at all (actually that is still something of an issue – but we are working on it). All that is past, thanks be to God and now it is the day we, even Catholic brothers and

sisters, sing Martin Luther's great hymn, A Mighty Fortress is Our God, I get to wear my Buchanan plaid stole and Calum gets to hear bag pipes in worship.

The Protestantal Reformation was part of a huge intellectual, political and cultural upheaval in Europe. It was about religion but it was also about emerging nation states, and political freedom and the radical new notion of the human person as autonomous, created to be free, bearing the image of God, and given responsibility for the conduct of his and her own life and life together in society. And it was about a basic belief about God and God's relationship to the world and to every individual human being.

Martin Luther was an Augustinian monk, a priest and a scholar. He was also terrified. Like most of the people of his age he believed that the deck was stacked against him. Life was short and brutal and over it all was a stern, judgmental God, an angry, fearsome God. At the end there was a hell of eternal torment. A person's only hope was to make some kind of peace with that angry God. Life, for many people, Martin Luther, among them, was an unhappy struggle to be good enough, and to do enough good, to persuade God to be less angry and perhaps assign your soul to heaven after an appropriate time in purgatory. The Church held the keys, literally. Luther was consumed with trying to please God – "to get to a gracious God" he put it. He prayed and fasted and went on pilgrimages, even inflicted pain on himself by flagellation, did a pilgrimage to Rome to reinforce his faith and trust in God and climbed up the long staircase on his knees. Nothing worked.

It was in his monk's cell, at his desk, preparing a series of lectures on Paul's Letter to the Romans that the moment of understanding happened. "Therefore, since we are justified by faith," Paul had written centuries before, "we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to the grace in which we stand." Luther said it was as if the truth in all its fullness burst upon him and the gates of paradise flew open.

The Church, Luther's church, had it all backwards. You don't have to persuade God to be gracious by praying, by attending masses, by going to confession, by fasting and self-flagellating – God is already gracious. You don't have to persuade God to be loving. God already loves. God is love.

God sent the only begotten son, not to condemn – but to save because of love.

That simple realization literally shook the foundation, not only of the medieval church but all of society. God is good. God is merciful and kind. People don't have to live in fear, dreading the end of life. Instead, people who know the good news can live in peace with God, in gratitude and in joy. Luther's new faith, and new church built on it, were not full of guilt and fear, but confidence and joy.

Now, by the way, these issues no longer divide Protestants and Catholics today. Catholic theologians teach Luther and Calvin as well as Thomas Aquinas. If we cannot share the Lord's Supper yet, some day we will. And we do share a lot: a common mission in the world, a common set of beliefs. I walked in here yesterday afternoon (I often do this instead of walking by, walk in and have a look around). Yesterday there was a wedding and up front two clergy, Adam Fronczek and a Roman Catholic priest. That would have been unheard of not so very long ago.

It was the sale of Indulgences that sent Luther over the top. Indulgences were issued by the church and promised forgiveness and a reduced time in purgatory. You could buy indulgences for yourself, or your departed relatives. Salesman traveled from town to town hawking indulgences on the street corner.

When the salesmen came to Wittenburg, where Luther was a theology professor, he went to his study and wrote out a theological critique of indulgences and the entire system whereby the church seemed to be offering access to God's grace by good works and praying, fasting, alms giving and purchasing Indulgences. Luther had a lot to say. He wrote ninety five critiques, or Theses, marched down to the castle church doors in Wittenburg, nailed them to the door with an offer to debate them with anyone. The rest is history. The church excommunicated Luther, persuaded the Holy Roman Emperor to condemn him as a heretic, put a price on his head, Luther went into hiding at the Castle of Wartburg – the "Mighty Fortress" where he spent his time translating the Bible into German so people could read and understand for themselves. Luther's thinking spread throughout Germany, the Low Countries, France, Switzerland, Great Britain.

A French lawyer, John Calvin, was drawn to Luther's thought, was a refugee from France, settled in Geneva and created a whole new way of being the church, a representative democracy – itself a radical new concept, based on the autonomy and rights of individuals. Calvin became the intellectual driving force of the Reformation and the Father of Presbyterianism, I have come to love the words of that hymn he wrote in 1551: "I greet Thee, who my sure Redeemer art."

Luther thought the gates of paradise opened when he finally realized that God was gracious and loving. Calvin would write:

> "Thou hast the true and perfect gentleness,
> No harshness hast thou and no bitterness,
> O grant us the grace we find in Thee
> That we may dwell in perfect unity!"

The Reformation represented a new way of thinking about God and what it means to be a faithful person.

Luther was not the first person in history to experience a sense of incompleteness, dislocation, anxiety, fear, estrangement, and certainly not the last. It seems to be part of who we are as human beings: theologians, psychologists, artists and poets express it in their own idiom. To be a human is to yearn for wholeness, yearn to be at home in the world, at home with oneself. The Bible puts it in terms of being exiled from the perfection of the garden, forever homesick for that original God-given security and peace.

A new book about Vincent van Gogh's tortured life recounts his attempt to be a clergyman. In his first sermon he quoted the psalm – "I am a stranger in the world." It was the theme of his life, never at home in the world or with himself.

Tatiana de Rosnay's fine novel and the motion picture based on it, Sarah's Key is about a young Jewish girl in Paris in 1942 whose family was rounded up and sent to a concentration camp. When the police come for them, Sarah hides her little brother in a secret closet, tells him to remain absolutely silent until she comes back for him, locks the door and keeps the key. The story is of her frantic attempts to return to her brother, and then her life-long struggle to come to terms with what happened, to forgive

herself, until her life ends in tragedy. It Is the theme of all great literature – the human experience of incompleteness, loneliness, guilt, separation from our true home, our best self, and God.

No one thought about it more profoundly than the late Paul Tillich. Tillich was one of the leading Christian intellectuals of the 20th Century. Educated in philosophy at the best German universities, a chaplain in the German Army during the First World War, an early opponent of Hitler's National Socialism, he was asked to leave Germany and spent the rest of his life teaching in America at Union Theological Seminary, Harvard and the University of Chicago. Tillich was legendary for the difficulty of his thought.

When he came to Chicago his lectures on the History of Western Thought filled the classroom and had to be moved to the public auditorium of Mandel Hall – which was also standing room only. I attended and comprehended very little. But I did meet him on the corner of Woodlawn and 57th Street, and couldn't think of anything more profound to say other than, "Nice day, isn't it?" He answered, "Ja!"

But when Paul Tillich preached he produced simple, elegant, straight forward sermons. His sermon on the text from Romans 5 is a Christian classic, "You Are Accepted." He had witnessed the pure, unadulterated evil of Nazism. He had learned from the Freudians the dark side of human consciousness. He had many personal, private struggles, demons and infidelities. He concluded that the human problem is that we are separated from the self God created us to be, separated from other people and, finally, ultimately separated from God. And so we spend our lives trying to make ourselves acceptable, trying to find our way home. "Our hope," Tillich said – not far from Luther, five centuries before, "is that God is gracious and kind and comes to us and accepts us as we are." Many of us do spend our lives trying to earn approval – the approval of parents, long after they are gone, the approval of teachers, mentors, self approval, and the approval of God.

"Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness," Tillich said. "It strikes us when we walk through the dark reality of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us – when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual, because we have violated another life," which he did.

And then the great philosopher, the flawed intellectual giant, became simply, clearly confessional in a way that has resonated with thousands and thousands, has resonated with me ever since I read it years ago:

“Sometimes a wave of light breaks into our darkness and it is as if a voice were saying – ‘You are accepted. You are accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now: perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now: later you will do much… Do not seek for anything: do not perform anything, do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted.’”

“We cannot compel anyone to accept himself or herself,” Tillich wrote. “But sometimes it happens that we receive power to say ‘yes’ to ourselves, that peace enters into us and makes us whole – grace has come upon us.”

That is what happened to Martin Luther in the midst of his life long struggle to make himself acceptable.

And it was the turning point for me when I finally got it: that being a Christian is not about being good enough so that God can love you, but being grateful that God already loves you; not about guilt and fear of ultimate rejection, but joy and peace because of God’s unconditional love. It was a turning point for me when I finally got it that God is merciful and kind, full of grace and compassion and forgiveness – and wants from me – and from you and from all of us – lives lived in joyful gratitude.

It’s why so many people, even people who don’t go to church or believe much of anything love an old gospel hymn, Amazing Grace.

It was written in 1779, by a British sea captain, John Newton, a slave trader. He described what happened to him unforgettably:

> “I once was lost, but now am found. Was blind, but now I see.”

And then, a crystal clear confession of a truth about God and all of us, even you and me:

> “Through many dangers, toils and snares
> I have already come:
> Tis grace has bought me safe thus far,

And grace will lead me home.”

Amen.